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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MOSCOW 000695

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SUBJECT: GOR TO WOO PUBLIC AFTER COMMUNISTS INFLUENCE
MILITARY REFORM DEBATE

Classified By: Acting Political Minister Counselor David Kostelancik for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: The Communist Party's (KPRF) vocal and consistent opposition to military reform plans has likely influenced President Medvedev's decision to revise how the GOR approaches the reforms. Communist leaders have criticized the reforms, especially plans to reduce the size of the military, for their perceived haste and lack of transparency, which the party has predicted will threaten Russian national security. The KPRF also has used the issue to bolster its membership among the armed forces and veterans, an already large KPRF constituency. KPRF's anti-reform tactics have included letters to Medvedev from party leaders and veteran groups, combined with rallies across Russia calling for Serdyukov's resignation and a halt to reforms. Although the regime will ultimately decide the course of military reform, the KPRF has been able to stir up opposition because the GOR has made little effort to win public support on the issue. In response, GOR officials have followed the Communists' lead by warning of an increasing U.S. "regional threat" and by beginning an "unprecedented" national outreach effort on March 23 to garner public support. End Summary.

GOR Follows KPRF Lead With Talk of U.S. Threat, PR Campaign

12. (C) After Communist Party opposition to reducing the size of the military and other reforms recently gained momentum, the GOR has followed the KPRF's lead in warning of an increased U.S. "regional threat." Just three days after KPRF Central Committee member General-Major E.I. Kopyshchev's March 14 letter to President Medvedev warned of an increasing U.S. "threat" to Russia, MinDef Serdyukov delivered similar remarks to military leaders. The Communists also had called for reforms to be supported by the Russian public, and on March 17 Medvedev delivered a speech to the Defense Ministry Board in which he noted that the government would seek just such support. On March 19, Aleksandr Machevskiy (press secretary for First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov) told us that Shuvalov and other leaders would begin an "unprecedented" and large-scale public outreach campaign across Russia to begin March 23. The first step, Machevskiy explained, would be a tour of five cities (including Voronezh and Vladivostok) in four days that will focus on rallying support for government policies, including military reform and anti-crisis measures. This approach contrasts with Serdyukov's ham-fisted and opaque reform-by-fiat approach, which has included the prohibition of those in uniform from publicly discussing the issue of military reform. Experts doubt, however, that the GOR will change its plans for

military reform, but rather that it recognized the need to improve its salemanship.

Communists Condemn Opacity and Haste, Offer No Alternative

13. (C) Since MinDef Serdyukov's August 2008 announcement of plans for "a new image of the armed forces," the Communist Party has provided the most vocal and consistent opposition to what KPRF chairman Gennadiy Zyuganov has called "ill-prepared if not adventurous" military reforms. In particular, the Communists have criticized the lack of outside input and transparency in the reform process, as well as the haste with which reforms have been pursued. The concern about limited outside input speaks to the Communists' complete lack of confidence in Serdyukov, whose own lack of service in the armed forces has been widely ridiculed -- most recently by KPRF Duma Deputy Ilyukhin in a March 13 interview and by KPRF Duma Deputy Vladimir Komoyedov in our March 17 meeting. Opponents derisively refer to Serdyukov as "the furniture salesman" because he managed a network of furniture stores during the Soviet era. Explaining why he is not confident in an opaque reform process, Zyuganov stressed that it is "extremely important to hear the views of top military experts who are not directly dependent on the Ministry of Defense," adding that a new "expert council" under the president could provide leadership to objectively assess the state of the armed forces. KPRF's General-Major Kopyshchev agreed, maintaining that military reform should be carried out "with the most experienced military leaders and

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scientists and with veterans."

14. (C) The concern over the speed of the reforms stems from the government's delay in issuing its new military and national security doctrine, which reportedly will be completed by summer 2009. KPRF head Gennadiy Zyuganov argued in a March 11 letter to Medvedev that pushing reforms before completing the doctrine "puts the cart before the horse" and will result in reforms shaping doctrine rather than vice versa. Zyuganov added that he is "confident" that "the destruction of the armed forces may be irreversible" if reforms are allowed to continue before the doctrine's release. The existing doctrine is inadequate for shaping reforms, Zyuganov has contended, because it "is not based on rigorous and comprehensive assessments of existing and potential threats."

15. (C) The Communists have not proposed an alternative plan for military reforms. Aside from calling for Serdyukov's resignation, the Communists have pressed only for the government to suspend the reform process and re-assess it with input from outside experts. A first step, KPRF has proposed, would be to enact a Federal Law on Military Reform to identify the objectives, timing, and methods of carrying out military reforms. Combined with the upcoming military and national security doctrine, the Communists have argued that such a law would lay the framework for a dialogue on military reform with defense experts and with Russian society.

Opposing Military Reform Speaks to Party Base

16. (C) Another key reason for Communists to oppose military reform is that the armed forces and veterans constitute key constituencies whose jobs and benefits are threatened by reforms. The Head of the Heritage Foundation in Moscow Yevgeniy Volk told us that a strong military was a source of Soviet pride, and Serdyukov's reforms do not sit well with veterans who remember "the good old days." The Communists, he argued, have been effective in harnessing veterans' discontent to garner support.

¶7. (C) KPRF Duma Deputy Komoyedov (and former commander of the Black Sea Fleet) told us March 17 that party rolls were swelling due to the economic crisis, but also because veterans and people currently serving in the armed forces are concerned about reforms. Komoyedov concluded that KPRF is the favorite party of those serving in the military, and the Communists' March 9 protest in Berdsk (see para 9) demonstrated that they have influence within the armed forces community to rally public support.

Reforms Would Weaken National Security, Bankrupt Russia

¶8. (C) KPRF has contended that the opacity and haste of the military reform process would imperil Russia's national security by depleting military rolls and ignoring threats from the U.S. and elsewhere. A March 7 article in the KPRF periodical "Soviet Russia" proposed that "external military threats to Russia are becoming increasingly acute" and that "our partners and neighbors are actively building up their forces, rapidly changing the balance of power not in favor of Russia." General-Major E.I. Kopyshchev, a member of the KPRF Central Committee, wrote in a March 14 letter to Medvedev that there is a "high chance that the U.S. and its allies in NATO will be looking for a way out of the global financial-economic crisis" through military adventures aimed at Russia's natural resources. On March 17, Komoyedov told us that threats abound on all of Russia's borders, including NATO enlargement, U.S. plans for missile defense, overwhelming population inequality on the two sides of the Russia-China border, Georgian revanchism, and Japanese claims to the Kurile Islands. These threats, Komoyedov argued, necessitate a vigilant, strong, and large military. "Soviet Russia" added as another threat "the inevitable U.S. military bases in Georgia."

¶9. (C) Other KPRF concerns with reforms focus on operational and financial limitations that reforms entail. KPRF has argued, for example, that current reforms would disrupt military command and control, undermine mobilization

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readiness, destroy the military education system by closing and consolidating military schools and academies, demoralize the officer corps, and bankrupt the budget.

Communists Use Public Rallies To Build Support

¶10. (SBU) As the only political party speaking widely about military reform, the Communists have been able to influence public opinion on the issue. On January 31, Zyuganov delivered a wide-ranging tirade on a snowy Moscow square, which included calls to halt military reform and fire Serdyukov. On the February 23 Defenders Day holiday (formerly Soviet Army Day), KPRF held rallies in dozens of cities across Russia to protest military reforms. Then on March 9, the KPRF with approval from local government authorities organized a rally in the town of Berdsk (outside of Novosibirsk) to protest the planned elimination of the 67th GRU special forces brigade stationed there. Claiming that this would eliminate 2,000 jobs from the town, the Communists rallied 1,000 people to protest the closure. (Note: Media reports provided conflicting information about whether active-duty military personnel participated or were prohibited from doing so by local commanders. If they did participate, this would be the first instance of active-duty soldiers protesting Serdyukov's reforms, according to experts.) Other veterans' groups have staged smaller rallies against military reform, most notably the Union of Soviet Officers whose protests in December and January garnered media attention.

Comment

¶11. (C) Despite limited mass media access and a relatively small Duma faction, the Communists have demonstrated they still can sound the alarm on issues affecting their core constituencies. During the current economic crisis, the Communists have been emboldened in their opposition to the regime. The GOR, however, has approached this as a tactical rather than a strategic error: the problem must lie not with the reforms themselves (which most military experts and our contacts agree are necessary), but with how they were presented and implemented. The Communists' opposition likely will not alter the substance of the proposed reforms, but some in the government have been chastened into seeking public approval and casting the U.S. "regional threat" in starker terms. The Communists' hand should not be overestimated; they continue to operate with strictly circumscribed limits on their opposition role, and their success in shaping opinion on other vital issues (such as anti-crisis measures) remains marginal.

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